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(l to r): **Carmen Leon, Jay Salter, Raul Rivera** and **Erica Lann-Clark**.

Creative Calabash

Artist Carmen Leon, bagpiper Jay Salter and a slew of other locals are set to receive the annual Calabash Award

by *Christa Martin*

Even at 7, Carmen Leon was ready to buck the system. She was a Catholic schoolgirl who wondered why the boys got to do all the fun stuff at church. This question piqued her curiosity and one day she snuck up to the church's bell tower where she knew she wasn't supposed to be. A restless artistic spirit was stirring within, and eventually the nuns caught on. They noticed the Latina was especially gifted in visual arts so they offered her little jobs: painting over the statues that needed repair, creating posters and doing various forms of art work for the school.

But still, the young child dreamt of a place where girls could go on adventures—the Land of Oz from the famous books by L. Frank Baum. Leon was too poor to buy the classics but she would borrow them from the library, fantasize about the colorful world of Oz, and peruse the beautifully illustrated books. Dorothy and the Wizard inspired her to create her first illustration, ironically, of a gypsy child.

Now, about 55 years later, Leon reminisces about her gypsy-like adventures throughout the years (going to art school in France), what brought her to Santa Cruz in 1973 (UC Santa Cruz) and an award that she will pick up on March 16 for being involved in the ethnic arts.

At the annual Calabash Awards ceremony at 7 p.m. she will be joined by: a Jewish storyteller (Erica Lann Clark), a Flamenco dancer (La Romera), a bagpiper (Jay Salter), a percussionist (Rick Walker), an Afro-Caribbean traditionalist (Raul Rivera), an arts promoter (Michael Horne) and an African singer at the Cabrillo College Theatre (Manjou Kone). The evening hands out praise and awards to a group of people who are either ethnic artists or provide multicultural types of artistic offerings to the community.

Leon currently works as a SPECTRA artist, meaning that she is under the leadership of the Cultural Council and teaches art to elementary school students in the county. She has taught mural painting, and general painting and drawing techniques. In the past she has taught children one of her favorite styles, "narrative painting," where the artist tells a personal story with his or her artistic rendering.

The style is vastly personal to Leon because in 1986 her mother died of cancer. Until that point the artist had predominantly concentrated on painting landscapes and abstracts. But something switched when tragedy struck. Following her mother's death Leon attended a UC Santa Cruz show called "Inspiring Women" and she began to reflect on her mother.

"I traveled with my father to Mexico and because of the inquiry with my cultural heritage and the connection with who I was as a Latina, I [transferred] the stories into [narrative] painting," Leon says.

This theme of death has peppered other elements of her life and her painting. She formerly worked as a bilingual Hospice volunteer for 15 years, providing care to those with terminal illnesses, and admittedly these experiences also influenced her artwork, adding new paintings based on dreams and myths.

But what she seems to brag on the most is simply working with the children in local schools. Perhaps it connects Leon to her wandering and curious childhood at the Catholic Church.

This much is for sure—that she, like many artists, possesses a gypsy-like quality of life, moving around and exploring various adventures.

Bagpiper Jay Salter has also walked in the gypsy-like lifestyle and he too will join Leon on March 16 to receive a Calabash Award. Salter's wandering ways happened when he set foot and bagpipe down in Santa Cruz about 12 years ago, when Pacific Avenue became his workspace. Salter, who lived in a cabin up in Davenport at the time, earned his dollars by creating music for passersby along downtown's main drag.

"People would pass out while listening to me; [someone was] arrested," he says, joking, with a hint of seriousness as he remembers the days when he made a living by playing on the streets. "At Christmas time I could make $100 a day."

But on the off-season his income was more like $25-$30 a day—things were stark. He began to pick up bagpiping gigs here and there, and would play at weddings, funerals, parties and public events. Eventually he got work at Santa Cruz High School teaching the students